

Associated Press Newswires

Cuts in federal, private funds mean less legal aid

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By Susan Skiles Luke

Illinois' poor will have less access to free lawyers thanks to a recent one-two punch: a cut in federal funding for the state's biggest free law clinics and a drop in a statewide fund that pays for legal aid.

The three groups that deliver most of the legal aid to the poor in Illinois will lose about \$920,000 in congressional funding annually, said Eric Kleiman, a spokesman for Legal Services Corp., the Washington-based agency that distributes federal money for legal aid.

The LSC allocates money to states based on the number of poor counted in the last census. The 2000 census showed Illinois with about 35,000 fewer people who are eligible for LSC services because of low income, about \$22,000 a year for a family of four, Kleiman said.

The three agencies are the Legal Assistance Foundation of Metropolitan Chicago, Rockford-based Prairie State Legal Services and Alton-based Land of Lincoln Legal Services.

The cuts will take the biggest bite out of Land of Lincoln, a network of eight offices and 40 lawyers who help clients in southern Illinois with problems like eviction, access to Social Security and obtaining orders of protection from abusive spouses.

The agency, which gets more than half of its \$5 million budget from the LSC, will lose \$525,000, said executive director Joseph Bartylak. Some lawyers will likely be laid off, and agency officials will meet this week to discuss whether to cut services, Bartylak said.

Land of Lincoln helped Tasha Johnson of Marion get Social Security benefits to support her four children after the 29-year-old woman was diagnosed with non-Hodgkin's lymphoma, a type of cancer, she said. Her application had been rejected three times.

"They're known for helping people," she said.

Although the three groups deliver most legal aid in Illinois, dozens of other programs offer similar services and all will feel the pain when the Lawyers Trust Fund of Illinois doles out grants for 2003.

The fund, created by the Illinois Supreme Court in 1983, gets interest from escrow accounts and other money lawyers often keep for their clients and spends it on legal aid.

This year, the fund will likely award just half of the \$3.5 million it usually gives some 34 groups statewide, said Ruth Ann Schmitt, the trust fund's executive director.

The Illinois General Assembly has appropriated about \$500,000 annually for legal aid in recent years, an amount Bartylak said has not been much reduced.

Still, of the nation's 10 most populace states, Illinois ranks last in the amount of money legislators appropriate for legal aid, LSC President John Erlenborn said earlier this year.

Sheldon Roodman, executive director of the Legal Assistance Foundation of Metropolitan Chicago, said the work these groups do is critical.

"(They take) cases like preserving an elderly person's home being foreclosed because of a predatory loan," Roodman said, "or an illegal eviction of a person who will become homeless. If people don't have access to the courts, somebody who has the upper hand takes advantage."